

ON DRUMS

Thanks- giving Drum- sticks

Get the right stick
for the lick

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MY RECENT columns have been on choosing equipment, but without one piece of gear, all the others are meaningless. The drumstick you use will have an impact on the sound you get, and how you play in general.

What It Is

There are two basic types of sticks available: wood and synthetic. The most popular woods in use are hickory, oak, and maple (the latter two being a bit more resilient),

each with its own density, weight, moisture content, and feel. Synthetic materials include graphite, composites of graphite and polycarbon, fiberglass, and so on.

The question of whether one is better than another has been battled back and forth lately by the "traditional" players and the "modernistic" players. Synthetics claim better longevity, while wood boasts a more natural feel. Some wooden stick manufacturers are finding ways to lengthen the life of their product. I can't recommend one over the other — the decision is entirely up to the individual player.

Whether sticks are wooden or synthetic, they do share some common variable elements in length, taper, diameter, weight, and tip shape. Of course, these physical aspects are what make one particular model (like a 7A stick) different from another (a 2B).

Generally, stick models with an "A" designation are lighter and thinner than ones with "B" designations, which in turn are less meaty than sticks catalogued with an "S" (for marching band or "street"). Common sense dictates that if you're a loud, heavy drummer, you wouldn't want to use a stick with a thin neck, as it would probably split in a matter of minutes. But very heavy sticks would overwork and damage any small, thin cymbals in your kit. Conversely, if you're a light player, fat sticks with a short taper would produce too much volume for your type of gig. If you break a lot of sticks near the tip, you may want to begin using a different model with a fatter neck.

Length Matters

Length of the drumstick plays a part in the volume produced, since a longer stick will have more weighted mass up front, enabling a more powerful downstroke. As well, a larger handle diameter will give more grip if you play matched grip style.

I think of nylon-tipped

sticks as being the bastard son of a wood and synthetic stick marriage, as the nylon gives a brighter, pingier cymbal sound, with increased rebound, but it's not the "natural" continuation of the wood stick, if you get my drift. Personally, I shy away from nylon tips, since they don't carry as much vibration to my hand.

Hot Tips

Speaking of tips, the shape of the stick tip will affect the resulting ride cymbal sound. Tip shapes range from oval, ball, olive, arrowhead, capsule, and many variations in between. Go to your music store and try out different tips on a cymbal, and listen to the tonal quality of the cymbal; you'll find a huge difference. Some drummers like to keep an assortment of stick models in their drumstick bag, in case they need a particular sound, or on gigs where they require different levels of volume.

Another point to keep in mind is the fact that one company's stick model may not be the same as another's, even though the letter/number designation is the same. For instance, one 5A may be a bit longer, or have a slightly different taper, or different weight. So another manufacturer's stick in the same model may not be an accurate substitute. Then again, you may find a pleasant surprise with another company's stick.

Check Please

Selecting sticks can be time-consuming. You definitely want to roll the sticks to check for warpage. (Synthetic models will be straight all the time, since they're molded.) Also, be sure both sticks in the pair that you choose are weighted and balanced the same. Since wood is a natural product, there are certain inconsistencies that might show up. Beware of any sticks with a dark burn-type mark or line, as those may break at that point.

Some companies take

pride in their sticks to the point of matching pairs at the factory in regards to weight and pitch, reducing the amount of effort for consumers to go through when choosing sticks.

Heavily lacquered sticks will be hard to hold once your hands perspire. One way to combat this is to use a stick wrapping, available from a few companies, around the bottom third of the stick. The wrap gives a more positive grip, but for some players it creates blisters. While stick wraps can be removed, rubber grips are a more permanent method of giving solid grip. Certain stick companies feature these as part of their line, but the trade-off is an increased handle diameter.

Cosmetics seem to be increasingly important since MTV came along, so sticks are available in all sorts of colors now. With wooden sticks, the colors are painted on, but with synthetics, the color is impregnated into the stick itself. The painted colors are cool, to be sure, but don't expect them to last indefinitely — they'll chip after heavy cymbal or rimshot playing sooner or later.

Cross Breeds

As an alternative stick sound, Pro-Mark and Calato are making "Multi-Rods" and "Blasticks," respectively, which give sounds in between a drumstick and a brush. Pro-Mark wraps thin wood dowels tightly together, while Calato uses thin nylon rods, thermo-molded into a plastic handle. If you need more volume than with a regular brush, but less than a stick, these may be worthwhile investments, and they're also capable of some unique sounds and effects.

Your drumsticks are your tools to get the job done, and the sticks you use should make that job go as smoothly as possible.

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